

Converted and Called by God

Paul's apostleship did not come from himself. At one stage he was exceedingly prejudiced against the idea that the Lord Jesus Christ could be the Saviour of Israel. He persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. Then there came the great day when God stepped into his life and turned him around. He tells the Galatians what happened. *'But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace¹, was pleased to reveal his Son to me in order that I might preach him among the gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood², nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and then returned again to Damascus³.* Paul describes here his conversion and his call to an independent apostleship. Let us consider its steps and stages.

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1. Paul was Predestined

1. There is a doctrine of predestination here. God had set Paul apart for salvation and for apostleship even before Paul was born. Actually this is true of every Christian. Paul is talking about salvation and forgiveness of sins and adoption into God's family when he says we are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world¹. I do not understand the biblical doctrine of unconditional predestination at all! I make no claim to understand it whatsoever! It certainly is not fatalism. But there is a doctrine of unconditional predestination in the Bible. Maybe I'll understand it more when I get to heaven. Meanwhile I believe it whether I understand it or not! Paul was chosen by God for salvation and for apostleship before he had done anything good or bad, before he had believed, before the foundation of the world – and therefore without reference to anything good or bad after the foundation of the world.

Ephesians 1:5-14

2. His birth superintended

2. God superintended Saul's birth. Although Paul refers to what happened before he was born, yet he surely has in mind that at the time of his birth God was fulfilling a plan that He already had in mind for Saul of Tarsus. Paul's words echo some words in Jeremiah and there the prophet was told even more clearly that God was overseeing what happened at Jeremiah's birth. *'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you'* ¹. God was acting before Paul was born, before Jeremiah was born. God was also at work when Paul was born, when Jeremiah was born. He chose them before their birth; then he formed them in their birth. And He has done the same for everyone who will ever believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our nationality, our skin colour, our physical constitution with its strengths or its weaknesses, our level of intellect, our temperament – it was all chosen before the foundation of the world. God created us to be exactly as we are, to come to faith in His Son and to be the servants of God and fulfil the 'good works ... prepared beforehand'.

Jeremiah 1:5

3. God's powerful call

3. In grace God called Paul to salvation and ministry. He 'called me by his grace', says Paul. 'Calling', in the way in which Paul often uses the term, is God's act of powerfully bringing us to know the Lord Jesus Christ. It is an act of power. Those whom God has chosen He calls¹, and those whom God calls He justifies. They do come to faith. The 'call' of God (in the way in which Paul uses the term) is powerful. I will not say that it is irresistible, but I will say that it overcomes the tendency within us to resist it. Paul was resisting the Lord Jesus Christ and persecuting the church of Jerusalem. But God 'called' him. God powerfully overthrew this resistance in the heart of Saul of Tarsus and brought him to faith. Actually this is what happens to all Christians. We are not 'saved' at all unless God has powerfully overthrown our resistance to Him and to His will. We are not 'saved' at all unless God has powerfully overthrown our unbelief and our wickedness.

Romans 8:30

4. God's Grace

4. God's call is entirely by God's grace. God's 'grace' is His kindness towards us. It is His willingness to work in our hearts – although we do not deserve anything from Him at all except His anger.

5. Paul brought to know who Jesus is

5. What happens in God's 'call' is that Saul of Tarsus is brought to know who Jesus is. *'Who are you Lord?'* Saul asked¹. He soon found out. He was meeting 'Jesus' properly for the first time², but he soon was proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues, saying 'He is the Son of God'³. When you come to salvation one thing that happens is that you realize who Jesus is. You realize that Jesus is

Acts 9:5
Acts 9:5
Acts 9:20

not just a prophet or a religious teacher who died hundreds of years ago. He is the Son of God, someone who shares God's divine nature; He became 'Jesus' – a human being.

God 'was pleased to reveal his Son to me', says Paul. It is difficult to translate. The Greek says 'to reveal his Son in me'. But it does not mean that what happened to Saul was just an internal vision. The risen Lord Jesus Christ was actually there, in the body. Saul was seeing Jesus outside of his own thinking, there in the body. Yet at the same time Saul was realizing something about Jesus that he had never known before. He was coming very speedily to realize that Jesus is the Son of God, risen from the dead.

5. Call to apostleship

6. **Saul's conversion includes a call to apostleship.** The Greek can also mean 'to reveal his Son through me'.¹ It includes the idea that what Saul of Tarsus was coming to realize (Jesus is the Son of God) he would eventually be passing on to other people. One reason why Saul was brought to salvation in precisely the way it happened was that God wanted Saul of Tarsus to know with 100% certainty, that Jesus is the glorious Son of God, risen from the dead, and the head of all His people everywhere. Saul knew all of this within minutes of meeting with the glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

7. Separate and distinct apostleship – to the gentiles

7. **His apostleship was distinct and separate from that of the apostles in Jerusalem.** This is Paul's main point here. Paul was told he would be sent to preach to gentiles. He did not need training in Jerusalem. It would not have helped him. He was going to have to start living in a more gentile manner himself. It would not have done him any good to try fit into the Jerusalem church, and it was not God's will for him. In fact at first Saul of Tarsus did not discuss what had been revealed to him with anyone. 'I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood¹, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia [whose border at that time was quite near, for the Arab "Nabatean" kingdom was not far from Damascus], and then returned again to Damascus'².

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God shapes our past to prepare us for the work he has for us to do

The important thing for us to note is this: the circumstances of our conversion are likely to have some kind of connection with the way in which God intends to use us. God specially shaped the way in which Saul of Tarsus came to faith in Christ. He was not brought to faith in Jerusalem – for God had plans for him that requires him to be converted elsewhere. He was allowed to spend some time as one zealous for the Mosaic law, before he was suddenly shown the truth. Paul's entire past was shaped to prepare him for the work he would have as apostle to the gentiles. It will be same for us. In a way that is utterly mysterious, God shapes our past to prepare us for the work He has for us to do.

Note

1. The Greek en can denote an agency, through which something is done.

	<p>Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His <i>Preaching Through The Bible</i> (PTTB) books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p>	
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